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SUBJECT: VATICAN ON SUMATE, VENEZUELA

REF: CARACAS 340

CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, DCM, EXEC, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassador and DCM took advantage of meetings with senior Vatican officials to press for a stronger Holy See stand on Venezuela, support for Sumate, and a formal reply to the President's recent call to the (now departed) papal nuncio. The incoming nuncio was receptive and looks forward to arriving in Washington for further talks with the USG on this subject and others. Nevertheless, we see no likelihood of a change in the Holy See's official (and cautious) position with regard to Venezuela. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a call on Monsignor Pietro Parolin, Undersecretary of the Second Section in the Holy See's Secretariat of State (effectively the Deputy Foreign Minister),

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DCM raised the plight of the Venezuelan NGO Sumate (making points outlined in reftel) and noted last month's call by President Bush to then-Papal Nuncio Montalvo, and the White House interest in the Holy See's reply. DCM stressed the importance to the USG of the Holy See's role in defending democracy and religious freedom in Venezuela.

¶3. (C) Parolin was not familiar with Sumate but promised to study the issue. More broadly, he urged the US to review the Venezuelan bishops' statement of a few weeks ago (presumably that of January 11). The Holy See is very concerned at the situation in Venezuela and is not satisfied with the government's behavior, but the only way open to the Holy See is to keep dialogue going. Do not expect a change in our public stance, said Parolin. With regard to the POTUS call, Parolin noted Montalvo's departure and said he was not aware of any reply from the Holy See but said he would check into it. DCM urged Parolin to consider support for Sumate.

¶4. (C) At a February 21 dinner hosted by Ambassador Rooney for Montalvo's designated successor, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, and attended by a number of prominent cardinals, Ambassador made clear the US interest in having the Holy See as a partner in Latin America to help promote religious freedom and democracy. Sambi told Ambassador he understood; he commented that in copying Castro, Chavez has jumped onto a dying ideology and failed model of government. Sambi also indicated that this concern about Venezuela is widely shared in the Holy See, and many support the statements of retired Cardinal Castillo Lara. Nevertheless, Sambi did not foresee any change in the official Holy See position for now.

¶5. (C) Ambassador also alerted Sambi to the need for a formal reply to the President's call to his predecessor. Sambi promised to seek one and looked forward to speaking with USG officials upon his arrival in Washington.

¶6. (C) Comment: the bottom line is that the Holy See is concerned about the situation in Venezuela but convinced that its only viable course is to seek dialogue with the GOV. We do not foresee any change in this official position, but do see value in keeping the Holy See apprised of USG views on developments in Venezuela. We will continue to raise the issue.

ROONEY